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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador Butenis and USAID Director called on Dr. Md. Osman Farruk, Minister of Education on 23 April 2006. The planned 30 minute call lasted almost one hour, with the Minister touching on everything from the BDG,s successes in education to his predictions on the upcoming election and the future leadership of his party, Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the country. Minister reiterated the open and frank relationship he has maintained with the USG and highlighted the importance for both sides of a continued strong Bangladesh-USG association. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador made her initial courtesy call on Dr. Md. Osman Farruk, Minister of Education on 23 April 2006. Ambassador opened the dialogue noting with appreciation how much the USG valued his views because of his long experience with the World Bank and as one of a few cabinet members able to understand where we were coming from and to articulate where the BDG was going. Minister responded he has found the exchange with previous ambassadors fruitful and hopes the USG felt the same.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador inquired about the BDG,s plans for improving education. Minister highlighted how dedicated the Prime Minister is to education and in particular girl,s education. Figures bear out their claims of success with enrollment at 93% and almost gender parity between girl and boy students. He pointed to this government,s girl,s stipend program as a positive innovation for keeping girls in school. The program provides the families of girl students a monthly stipend for keeping the girls in school as long as they have 75% attendance, are not married and maintain 40% marks. He mentioned they have around 4.0 million girls receiving stipends. He said, this not only contributes to a better educated female populace, but would help in health and

family planning by delaying marriages and thus deferring first birth. He takes credit for breaking the mindset of cheating as a previously acceptable practice. At first he encountered opposition amongst his fellow cabinet members, but eventually gained their support. Also, he has turned textbook publishing over to the private sector in an attempt to reduce corruption in the production and distribution.

¶4. (SBU) Madrassah education is an area of concern to many in the government. He has pushed to have the madrassahs come under the Madrassah Board requiring them to teach the government curriculum. This type of madrassah is referred to as &alia.8 He indicated the BDG is making headway in this area, but not with those madrassahs not under BDG control called &qwami8 madrassahs.

¶5. (C) Responding to his prediction on the upcoming election, he said his analysis indicated the BNP has around 40-45% popular support with around 35-40% for the Awami League (AL).

The swing is Jamaat Islami (JI) with around 8%. The other parties, including Ershad,s, are too inconsequential to be considered in the mix. On seats, he predicted the BNP would win around 160 seats with JI another 15 and AL around 110. With the BNP-JI coalition still strong, he predicts they will win again. The Ambassador noted, if the Minister was correct, the BNP would have a majority of seats without the JI. He did not respond.

16. (C) On the future of the BNP, he highlighted the growing strength of PM,s son, Tarique Rahman, within the party with his following considered as the new generation⁸ of the BNP. The Minister admitted this has created tensions between the BNP old and the new guard. The Minister indicated how impressed he has been on Tarique,s political acumen. He told the Ambassador that when he returned to Bangladesh in 2001 to run for office, he was directed to Tarique who handed him an envelope which contained information on the constituency where he was running, including talking points on issues of importance to the people of the area and what party messages should be delivered. The Minister said that at Tarique,s residence there is a battery of computers filled with data and analyses of the 300 parliamentary districts. He also noted that in moving around the countryside, Tarique has along with him Ministers or MPs from those areas, but they have taken back seats to him.

17. (C) On the future government, assuming a BNP victory, he said that Khaleda Zia would continue as PM as she still has things she wants to complete, with Tarique taking on an influential Ministry, (none was named). To the Ambassador,s query would the PM hand the leadership over to Tarique at some point and move on to be President, the Minister said emphatically that was not in the plans. He did say that the face of a BNP cabinet would be different. He pointed out the current cabinet initially was to have only 29 members, but after Tarique and some of his colleagues heard about it, they realized there would be little or no room for new ministers, so Tarique insisted upon an expanded cabinet including State or junior ministers. The Minister relayed he had problems with his State minister until he made it clear to the PM, the education portfolio was his and he would set the policy and trends and the State minister was there to follow.

18. (SBU) The meeting closed with a clear indication from the Minister of his desire to continue the relationship he has established with previous ambassadors. Ambassador Butenis again indicated the value the USG places on the relationship and sees it continuing.

CHAMMAS